

“Left Alone with America”

The Absence of Empire in the
Study of American Culture

One of the central themes of American historiography is that there is no American Empire. Most historians will admit, if pressed, that the United States once had an empire. They then promptly insist that it was given away. But they also speak persistently of America as a World Power.

—William Appleman Williams, 1955¹

Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.

—Toni Morrison, 1992²

The field of American studies was conceived on the banks of the Congo. This genealogy appears in Perry Miller's well-known preface to *Errand into the Wilderness*, where Africa gives rise to the now legendary scene of intellectual awakening to the “meaning of America.”³ In the 1956 preface Miller recalls how as a college dropout in the 1920s he boarded an oil tanker for Africa in search of the “adventure” he had missed on the European battlefields of World War I. His perception of the “tawdry” reality of Africa, however, thwarted his romantic expectation of exotic exploits; yet it offered him, as though in compensation, an even more heroic “quest.” With the force of an “epiphany,” while he was unloading drums of oil, “the jungle of central Africa” vouchsafed to him “the pressing necessity for expounding my America to the twentieth century.” The imag-

ined blankness of Africa inexplicably crystallized in the fullness of America. His own journey into the fabled "Heart of Darkness" led Miller not to Marlow's "beginning of the world," but to the origins of American culture, not to Kurtz's breakdown of the European subject, but to the vocation of the American historian. Miller's expedition did for his intellectual development what he claims the Puritan errand did for American history; it founded the "beginning of a beginning" that gives coherence to all that follows. From the remote vantage of the Congo Miller discovered himself at home with a coherent national identity; there, like the Puritans in the wilderness, he found himself "left alone with America."

Miller's preface maps the boundaries of national identity by demarcating the narrative of American origins from the African setting of his epiphany. This distinction embraces other key oppositions that sever the European errand from the indigenous inhabitants of the wilderness; intellectual history from social history; domestic identity from foreign relations; and the Puritan migration from the middle passage of enslaved Africans. These conceptual borders, I will argue, delineate Miller's apprehension of the "uniqueness of the American experience" as antithetical to the historical experience of imperialism. The preface is remarkable, however, for the wealth of material it evokes and dismisses in order to forge the coherence of what Miller calls "*the fundamental theme.*" He turns Africa into the repository—and thus uneasy reminder—of those repressed alternatives, and it comes to embody an inventory of counter-evidence, from which one can plot shadow narratives of imperial histories underlying and contesting his story of Puritan origins. Miller's Africa thus both defines and threatens to destabilize his carefully negotiated boundaries of American identity.

Cultures of United States Imperialism takes for its subject what Miller relegated to the unnarrated background of Africa: the multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conquest, conflict, and resistance which have shaped the cultures of the United States and the cultures of those it has dominated within and beyond its geopolitical boundaries. The essays in this volume reconnect those realms severed by Miller's cartography of American uniqueness and attempt to reconstruct the competing cultural histories implicitly rejected and displaced onto the site of Africa. Miller's discovery of America in the Congo—his return of and return to the repressed—brings into conjunction key moments of the formation of U.S. cultures in the context of Western imperialism which this volume addresses: European colonization, slavery, westward expansion, overseas intervention, and cold war nuclear power.

Most histories of American studies single out Miller's preface as a "paradigm drama" in the foundation of the discipline. These readings, however, have ignored the centrality of the African context as the enabling condition that actively shapes that paradigm.⁴ Instead they find that the incongruity of the exotic backdrop passively highlights the drama of intellectual self-discovery; Africa thus figures as distance itself, a foil or shadow for the Puritan "city on the hill." Toni Morrison, in contrast, has suggested that such distancing may conceal a more profound and unsettling intimacy, part of the process of constituting a dominant white national identity in relation to an Africanist presence: "through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness." My reading of the preface draws out the international and spatial dimensions of Morrison's argument by examining how Miller attributes the genesis of his "sense of Americanness" to his presence in Africa. What Morrison calls "the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism"⁵ can be seen at work in the preface, where the apparently remote, exterior setting produces inner meaning and gives coherence to the central narratives: the origins of a life's work, of an academic discipline, and of America itself.

My introduction begins with Perry Miller in the Congo, even though his model for American studies has in many ways been superseded, to argue that the imperial dimensions of his founding paradigm have yet to be fully explored and still remain in place today. The first part of my introduction demonstrates how Miller represents a coherent America by constructing Africa as an imperial unconscious of national identity. From the decentering perspective of the African background, a close reading of Miller's preface foregrounds the ways in which imperialism has been simultaneously formative and disavowed in the foundational discourse of American studies. The second part of my introduction examines how this paradigm has persisted and shifted in the redefinition of empire and culture across different fields.

I

Miller's vision of America sharpens into focus against an African background that grows less and less distinct, metamorphosing from the named

port of Matadi on the Congo, to "the edge of the jungle of Central Africa," to the "barbaric tropic," to the point where, finally, it is only evoked metonymically by Miller's own presence "among the fuel drums." As the colonial reality of Africa recedes from view, Miller charts his discovery of America's theological origins, while his language, with unintentional irony, rhetorically reenacts the material colonization of America that he rejects as the subject of his study. After his first reference to the "vacant wilderness" awaiting early settlement, America is next imaged at a further stage of colonization, as an "inexhaustible wilderness" mined for its natural resources, as Miller supervises the flow of oil to Africa. When Miller returns to graduate school, he employs an extended metaphor of agricultural development: "as for the interminable field which may be called the meaning of America, the acreage is immense and the threshers too few." Here he transforms "the meaning of America" into a field for study. From there he turns to the present of the United States as an industrial republic in the 1950s; the drums of oil no longer point back to the wilderness, but ahead to the "future of the world . . . tangible symbols of the republic's appalling power." Standing in counterpoint to Miller's insistence on theological origins, these images of American development uncannily mirror Miller's immediate setting—the unacknowledged colonial history of Africa.

The mirroring of "jungle" and "wilderness" effaces the inhabitants of both continents whose histories would undermine the coherence of both the Puritan errand and Miller's mission. In the opening of the preface, he describes the overall unity of his volume as "a rank of spotlights on the massive narrative of the movement of European culture into the wilderness of America." The acknowledgment that he has "silently expunged" what he calls his "more egregious lapses," suggests deeper silences and longer lapses that underwrite his massive narrative. In Miller's formulation, the origins of America stem from a dyadic relationship between Europe and an empty continent, while his presence in Africa introduces a triangular relationship that destabilizes this dyad. The presence of Africa—and the absence of its inhabitants—both reproduce the imaginary vacancy of the wilderness and threaten to disrupt this closed dyadic relationship by introducing a repressed third realm of the unnarrated stories of colonization, slavery, and resistance that link the histories of both continents.

Just as Miller implicitly distinguishes the narrative of American history from the unnarratable African setting, he more explicitly distinguishes his own historical method from prior alternatives. When he first

describes his epiphany of "the fundamental theme," Miller differentiates his own intellectual "quest" from the material biases of "social history," which he ridicules as "the Wilmot Proviso and the chain store." Both examples to him of crude materialism are also telling instances of nineteenth-century expansion, one through territorial conquest in a war with Mexico (1846–48) and the other through later economic rationalization. Reference to the Wilmot Proviso also introduces the major theme Miller never touches in his work but silently evokes on the banks of the Congo: American slavery. Defeated in its effort to outlaw slavery in the newly conquered territories, the Wilmot Proviso brought into view the profound connection between westward expansion and slavery which would lead to the Civil War. This link was often denied by politicians, such as President Polk, who claimed that slavery "was purely a domestic question" and "not a foreign question."⁶ A similar demarcation of the domestic from the foreign is central to Miller's conception of the meaning of America as well: that America—once cut off from Europe—can be understood as a domestic question, left alone, unique, divorced from the international conflicts—whether the slave trade or the Mexican War—in which that national identity takes shape. Miller's presence on the banks of the Congo evokes an earlier historical connection to Africa in the slave trade, with its later consequences in the Wilmot Proviso, which breaks down the absolute boundary between domestic and foreign at the same time that he insists upon them.

Slavery is thus invoked by the Wilmot Proviso only to be relegated to what Miller tellingly calls "the warp and woof" of American history, just as Africa is relegated to the backdrop of his own epiphany. Yet as the preface proceeds and America emerges as a field of study awaiting its earliest threshers, this silent backdrop gets more and more crowded and noisy. When the Puritan migration appears to Miller as the "beginning of a beginning," he feels compelled parenthetically to concede to and reject the priority of Virginia (which he does once home from Africa in the "security of graduate school"). His explanation is tautological: "what I wanted was a coherence with which I could coherently begin." Virginia, however, would obstruct coherence for reasons other than the insignificance of the white settlers and their lack of an articulate body of expression, as Miller claims. Beginning with Jamestown would evoke a counternarrative of migration to that of the Puritans: the forced migration of Africans on slave ships, and the unarticulated expression of another historical trajectory which Miller's student Edmund Morgan would describe twenty years later in *American Slavery, American Freedom*. Jamestown is incoherent as

a beginning, because it would resonate with Miller's immediate setting in Africa to initiate an alternative narrative of beginnings in slavery, in the triangle of Europe, America, and Africa, not the neat dyad of the errand into the wilderness.

Indeed the locus of Miller's epiphany in Africa arises from the unacknowledged interdependence of the United States and European colonialism. To give coherence and clarity both to the "massive narrative" of American development and the consistency of his own career, Miller effaces the historical referents to his own position in what was then the Belgian Congo in the 1920s. He mentions neither Africans nor Europeans, nor the global conditions which would have brought Miller to Africa on an oil tanker, presumably delivering petroleum for cars and trucks that were crucial to the colonial apparatus at the time. Miller's account of raw material flowing out of the United States to Africa performs a curious reversal, since the primary economic circuit would have been the extraction and export of minerals *from* the Congo to Europe. By the 1920s, U.S. capital and individual engineers had major stakes in the largely Belgian mining industry of the Congo (where there was a settlement called "little America"). Miller's apparently random and quixotic arrival in Africa could only have been made possible by the longstanding economic, political, and cultural involvement of the United States in European colonialism, of which the Congo is a major case in point.⁷ This triangulated relation of the United States, Europe, and the colonized world had added resonance in the 1950s when Miller wrote his preface on the eve of African independence, a process in which the United States was already playing a crucial neocolonial part in molding multiple struggles for decolonization to a dyadic script of cold war conflict. Thus the African setting of Miller's epiphany directly situates the United States in the broader history of Western imperialism, at the same time that his narrative of origins divorces him from it.

Miller more explicitly suggests and denies that he is writing imperial history in a tongue-in-cheek comparison of his epiphany to that of Edward Gibbon, who conceived of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* among Roman ruins, "while listening to barefooted friars chanting response in the former temple of Jupiter." Miller finds parallels to his own situation: "It was given to me equally disconsolate on the edge of a jungle of central Africa, to have thrust upon me the mission of expounding what I took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States, while supervising, in that barbaric tropic, the unloading of drums of case oil flowing out of the inexhaustible wilderness of America." Miller again draws startling

parallels only to disclaim them. Gibbon saw in contemporary evidence of Christian spirituality a narrative of decline from the past glories of empire; Miller inversely looks at evidence of a contemporary empire, in the material forms of the oil drums, and transforms them into evidence of the spiritual origins of the past. In contrast to Gibbon, who started at "the beginning of a fall"—which made for aesthetic coherence—Miller starts at "the beginning of a beginning." He thereby transforms himself from a European historian into an American visionary as he evokes Walt Whitman (who, as Miller paraphrases him, never got beyond the beginning of his studies). Miller implicitly differentiates the American republic in its illimitable capacity for self-renewal and expansion—to always be at the beginning—from the inevitable decline of Old World empires. This differentiation from Rome Empire paradoxically allows the United States to assume the mantle of Old World empires, and safely inoculates it from their inevitable decline, while his playful tone undermines this distinction.

The racially inflected distinction between images of the "jungle" and "wilderness" underwrites the familiar opposition between Old and New Worlds in this passage. If America is not like the decaying empire of Rome, implies Miller, it is even less like the depleted undeveloped continent of Africa. In contrast to the enervated "barbaric tropic," marked by its unspoken connotations of blackness, the "inexhaustible wilderness" offers the challenging space of implicitly white achievement. In the reference to "barefoot friars," where we might expect to find barefoot Africans, Old World empire and African jungle come together as sites of decay and exhaustion, into which American vitality flows. Miller reverses the trajectory of the colonial "mission" from the backward barbarians to the "twentieth century," and thereby redeems Protestant doctrine from the decay of Gibbon's Catholic friars, just as he redeems the inexhaustible American wilderness from the already exhausted jungle. This implicit differentiation from black Africa is as crucial to the ascription of American uniqueness as is the more common opposition to Old World empires.

In the personal narrative of the preface, this reclamation of national vigor allows him to return home—rejuvenated as a "boy" in graduate school—where he would renew America's Puritan origins as a fertile field for study, against his teacher's warnings that the field was already "exhausted." While rejecting Turner's frontier thesis on intellectual grounds (in the preface to his titular essay), Miller's personal narrative reenacts a frontier tale: the rejuvenation of the lone white male in the wilderness, who submits to the power of a feminized and racialized landscape only

to wrest control and separate himself from it, substituting in this case intellectual work for regeneration through violence.⁸

In the final oblique reference to his stay in Africa, Miller looks back typologically at the fuel drums to find not only the Puritan past, but also a portent of the future and his own present in the nuclear age. Miller, I believe, feared that nuclear destruction would become the tragically ironic fulfillment of the Puritan errand into the wilderness. He ends his first essay with the Puritan failure to "rivet the eyes of the world" on their "city on the hill" (15), and in the final essay, "The End of the World," nuclear power succeeds overwhelmingly in riveting the eyes of the world not on New England but on Hiroshima (238). In the preface, Miller refers to this "appalling power" as a problem, with which he can curiously see no way of "coping . . . except by going to the beginning of" Puritan theology. His mission to the twentieth century becomes more urgent at this point as part of a broader insistence that "the mind of man is the basic factor in human history." Thus the double meaning of the Puritan "errand" spawns two competing historical trajectories in the 1950s: one leading to the transcendent life of the mind, the other to nuclear destruction, "a point in time beyond which the very concept of the future becomes meaningless" (217). Miller's mission becomes an effort to recover the original meaning of the errand, as on some "incomprehensible behest" (217) to counter the threatened end of the world by writing intellectual history in protest against the nuclear flash.⁹ In venturing out to Africa, where he receives his "mission," he completes the cycle from which the Puritans were severed, to return home as a light to the world. In his opening theatrical metaphor of writing history as "a rank of spotlights," Miller restores the international audience that the Puritans lost when they were left alone in the darkened theater called America.

At this point where nuclear power enters his narrative in the present, Africa disappears from the background of the preface. To elevate American history to the ongoing life of the mind, Miller rejects the frightening alternative view of American history culminating in nuclear power. To uphold this belief, he projects this possibility onto Africa, which then fades out as though it were weighted down with the material symbols of America's "appalling power." Yet in the 1950s of the preface, Africa lingers in the shadow of the "city on the hill" and threatens to disrupt its light with independent narratives of decolonization and resistance to the unilinear history of cold war nuclear policy.

Thus to maintain the consistency of his own intellectual quest and

the coherence of American history in the origins of Puritan thought, Miller must reject alternative origins: "This was not a fact of my choosing: had the origin been purely economic or imperial I should have been no less committed to reporting." As his preface so painstakingly details, the "meaning of America" lay not in Virginia and the slave trade, not in the Wilmot Proviso and westward expansion, not in the chain store and economic development, not in the fuel drums Miller unloaded in Africa in the 1920s, not in the nuclear power which so appalls him in the 1950s; nor could the life of the mind in America be written as either social history or Gibbon's imperial history. Instead Miller's preface clears the ground for his "spacious theme" by forcing competing themes into the space called "Africa," the site which generates and challenges the coherence of the project that would become American studies.

II

The location of Miller in Africa reveals the discursive formation of what William Appleman Williams called "one of the central themes of American historiography": that "there is no American Empire." *Cultures of United States Imperialism* challenges this still resilient paradigm of American exceptionalism that links the political practice of empire with its academic study. The second part of my introduction discusses three salient absences which contribute to this ongoing pattern of denial across several disciplines: the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism.

The study of American culture has traditionally been cut off from the study of foreign relations. From across this divide, however, the fields of American studies and of diplomatic history curiously mirror one another in their respective blind spots to the cultures of U.S. imperialism. In a classic work of American studies, for example (contemporaneous with Miller's *Errand*), Richard Chase defined the special features of the American romance by distinguishing it from the imperial tendencies of the English novel:

The English novel, one might say, has been a kind of imperial enterprise, an appropriation of reality, with the high purpose of bringing order to disorder. By contrast . . . the American novel has usually seemed content to explore, rather than to appropriate and civilize, the remarkable and in some ways un-

examined territories of life in the New World and to reflect its anomalies and dilemmas. It has not wanted to build an imperium but merely to discover a new place and a new state of mind.¹⁰

A "new place" devoid of inhabitants (like Miller's wilderness) is elided into a "new state of mind" (the secularized errand), subject to its own internal tensions, unshackled and unsullied by the imperial politics of appropriation and civilization. Furthermore, Chase draws on an enduring assumption that the American struggle for independence from British colonialism makes U.S. culture inherently anti-imperialist.

Whereas Chase, like Miller, would have considered an American Empire to be a contradiction in terms, historians of foreign policy often deny its existence even when addressing the subject, as a recent revaluation of "The Global Role of the United States and its Imperial Consequences" concludes:

Empire has remained a mere episode in American foreign policy. The acquisition of colonies and permanent informal control were the goals of American foreign policy only from 1898 to 1912. . . . The United States rose to the level of a global power in the course of its two struggles with what it considered as German imperialism, and after 1945 in the wake of the "containment" of what was officially perceived as "Soviet imperialism."¹¹

Distant from traditional concerns of American studies, this historian voices a theme held in common with literary critic Chase, in the ascription of American uniqueness: just as the presumed openness and exploratory nature of the American novel become essentially nonimperial in contrast to the British, the unique feature of American global power lies in its opposition to the imperialism of the Nazis and the Soviets. Furthermore, Miller's dyad reappears in the central opposition between American and English novels that makes Indians disappear from Chase's "unexamined territories," just as the colonized world disappears from the struggle between the United States and totalitarianism.

Both examples—one from American studies in the 1950s, the other from diplomatic history in the 1980s—speak from within a cold war discourse, which defines American exceptionalism as inherently anti-imperialist, in opposition to the empire-building of either the Old World or of communism and fascism, which collapse together into totalitarianism. Yet in the demise of the cold war, the disavowal of American imperialism persists in the opposition to new "evil empires." The following Op-Ed piece on the eve of the Gulf War, for example, by a professor of international affairs, defines United States global power as nonhege-

monic because it is opposed to the imperial aggression of a postcolonial nation:

It took the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to reveal what should have been obvious all along to the foreign policy experts: the bipolar, cold war world has given way not to "multipolarity" but to "unipolarity," with the U.S. the only pole left. . . . But unipolarity is not the same as American hegemony. . . . A unipolar world is not the same as a hierarchical system dominated by a single power that creates the rules as well as enforces them. . . . America could have stood by while the world drifted into a dangerous multipolarity. But, provoked by Mr. Hussein, the Bush Administration stopped this drift in a flurry of military deployments and superlative diplomatic activity. . . . Unipolarity arrived in just one summer week.¹²

These passages bear out Williams's observation of a double dynamic whereby displacement accompanies denial: "World Power" not "American Empire"; "discovery" not "imperium"; "global power" not "imperialism"; "unipolarity" not "hegemony." Furthermore, to denial and displacement we can add projection; imperial politics denied at home are visibly projected onto demonic others abroad, as something only they do and we do not. If the vehemence and persistence with which something is denied mark its importance and even formative power, the characterization of a nation's ideological opponents reveals as much about that nation's self-conception as it does about its enemies. Whereas the anti-American imperialists of the cold war ranged from the Old World of Europe to the brave new world of totalitarianism, the nations of the former colonized world—embodied in the Satanic Hussein—have now emerged as the new imperialists threatening "multipolarity" against the New World Order.

A major challenge to what might be called the paradigm of denial was launched by William Appleman Williams in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1955, another book contemporaneous with *Errand*). By focusing primarily on the economic sources of imperial expansion, however, Williams and his school of "revisionists" tended to ignore the role of culture in the unfolding of imperial politics. They thereby inverted yet remained within Miller's paradigm, which divides the spiritual and intellectual origins of America from its imperial and economic roots. Within this broad division, Williams was reacting directly against George Kennan and his school of "realists." In *American Diplomacy* (1951), Kennan articulated a long historical tradition of explaining away U.S. imperialism as an aberration, or a fleeting episode in the brief period following the Spanish-American War. Historians of Kennan's school, who view imperialism as inconsequential to American history, tend to attribute its brief

eruption to the motivations that we might now call cultural: whether the misguided "moral idealism" of foreign policy elites, "public opinion," or "mass hysteria" generated by the yellow press. This view of empire as a momentary psychological lapse was countered by Williams in his view of imperial expansion as the driving force in national history from the conquest of North America through the cold war. Williams attributed this imperial drive primarily to economic motivations in the ongoing search for foreign markets to alleviate economic crises and preempt domestic social upheaval.

Revisionist emphasis on economic causality may have stemmed in part from the effort to endow imperialism with reality and solidity against the subjective explanations given by those "realists" who relegated empire to a minor detour in the march of American history. The economic approach, however, embodied its own contradictions, which led to multiple debates among historians, for example, about whether the fabled markets of Asia—long the chief prize sought by advocates of expansion—were mere "illusions," as opposed to having "real" economic value. If economics is privileged as the site of the "real," then cultural phenomena such as the belief in markets, or racist discourse, or the ideology of "benevolent assimilation" can only be viewed as "illusions" that have little impact on a separate and narrowly defined political sphere.

This volume aims to explore more fully Williams's later understanding, which goes beyond economics alone, of *Empire as a Way of Life*—not only for the "foreign" subjects of U.S. domination, but for the U.S. citizens who benefit from it, who are subjugated to it, and who resist it. To understand the multiple ways in which empire becomes a way of life means to focus on those areas of culture traditionally ignored as long as imperialism was treated as a matter of foreign policy conducted by diplomatic elites or as a matter of economic necessity driven by market forces. Not only about foreign diplomacy or international relations, imperialism is also about consolidating domestic cultures and negotiating intranational relations. To foreground cultures is not only to understand how they abet the subjugation of others or foster their resistance, but also to ask how international relations reciprocally shape a dominant imperial culture at home, and how imperial relations are enacted and contested within the nation.

If the importance of culture has gone unrecognized in historical studies of American imperialism, the role of empire has been equally ignored in the study of American culture.¹³ The current paradigm of

American studies today, still under intense debate, emphasizes multicultural diversity and scholarly "dissensus" and analyzes American society and culture in terms of internal difference and conflicts, structured around the relations of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. This approach overturns the paradigm to which Miller contributed, of consensus and univocality, wherein the meaning of America could be distilled through the symbolic manifestations of its mind and its seamless historical narrative. Yet the new pluralistic model of diversity runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly on the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating their formation. That is, American nationality can still be taken for granted as a monolithic and self-contained whole, no matter how diverse and conflicted, if it remains implicitly defined by its internal social relations, and not in political struggles for power with other cultures and nations, struggles which make America's conceptual and geographic borders fluid, contested, and historically changing.

By defining American culture as determined precisely by its diversity and multivocality, "America" as a discrete identity can cohere independently of international confrontations with other national, local, and global cultural identities within and outside its borders. The critical force of multiculturalism thus may lay itself open to recuperation by a renewed version of "consensus." In a recent introduction to "The New American Studies," for example, Philip Fisher reduces multiculturalism and the complex identities of gender, race, and ethnicity to what he calls a new "regionalism," set in dialectic tension with the unifying elements of American nationalism. He tellingly transcribes all conflicts as "civil wars" over representation, over boundaries internal to an isolated fixed nationhood, and these conflicts inevitably help to cement the center. Thus it is not surprising that such a formulation leads back to revoice the rhetoric of cold war exceptionalism:

Analysis within American studies will always be characterized by the absence of a monopoly of power. Because America had no experience of monarchy, it has a permanent democratic core working not only against the centralization of power, but, more important, against its inheritance or preservation over time. In the absence of a state we find ourselves freed of the intellectual components of the systematic state: ideology.¹⁴

In this model, the lack of a state means that the borders of national identity appear infinitely porous, but in fact, remain inflexibly unchallenged

by competing political claims, ideological conflicts, or historical change. To reconsider the meaning of imperialism in American studies is to make statehood unavoidable as precisely the site of the monopoly of power and the production of ideology which Fisher finds inherently un-American. Yet the power concentrated in an imperial state is not static as he implies but is amassed both as an ongoing political, social, and cultural process in struggle with oppositions it gives rise to and responds to at home and abroad, and as a monopoly whose contours change over time in relation to those struggles.

This volume contributes to the multicultural critique of American ethnocentrism, not by supplanting heterogeneity with a new synthesis of empire, but by relating those internal categories of gender, race, and ethnicity to the global dynamics of empire-building. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* explores how such diverse identities cohere, fragment, and change in relation to one another and to ideologies of nationhood through the crucible of international power relations, and how, conversely, imperialism as a political or economic process abroad is inseparable from the social relations and cultural discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and class at home. The binary opposition of the foreign and the domestic is itself imbued with the rhetoric of gender hierarchies that implicitly elevate the international to a male, public realm, and relegate the national to a female, private sphere. Foregrounding imperialism in the study of American cultures shows how putatively domestic conflicts are not simply contained at home but how they both emerge in response to international struggles and spill over national boundaries to be reenacted, challenged, or transformed.

The domestic and the foreign have long met on "the Frontier," a major conceptual site in American studies, which has undergone revision from the vacant space of the wilderness to a bloody battlefield of conflict and conquest, and more recently to a site of contacts, encounters, and collisions that produce new hybrid cultures. Yet this most recent revision of the frontier risks downplaying the imperial dimensions of power and violence that structure, underwrite, and are informed by cultural "interpenetrations."¹⁵ The field of Chicano studies has begun to redress the conceptual limits of the frontier, by displacing it with the site of "the borderlands."¹⁶ Where the frontier implies a model of center and periphery, which confront one another most often in a one-way imposition of power, the borderlands are seen as multidimensional and transterritorial; they not only lie at the geographic and political margins of national identity but as often traverse the center of the metropolis. The border-

lands link the study of ethnicity and immigration inextricably to the study of international relations and empire. At these borders, foreign relations do not take place outside the boundaries of America, but instead constitute American nationality. The borderlands thus transform the traditional notion of the frontier from the primitive margins of civilization to a decentered cosmopolitanism.

Chicano studies has brought an international perspective to American studies in part by reconceiving the concept of ethnicity (traditionally treated as a self-enclosed entity) through the theory and politics of post-coloniality. Most current studies of imperial and postcolonial culture, however, tend to omit discussions of the United States as an imperial power.¹⁷ The history of American imperialism strains the definition of the postcolonial, which implies a temporal development (from "colonial" to "post") that relies heavily on the spatial coordinates of European empires, in their formal acquisition of territories and the subsequent history of decolonization and national independence. How would this Eurocentric notion of postcoloniality apply to the history of American imperialism, which often does not fit this model? What would postcolonial culture mean in relation to U.S. imperialism, both on its own territory and in parts of the world where the United States predominated more directly only after the formal independence of former European colonies, in a power relation often called neocolonial? Is it possible yet to speak of "postimperial" culture, and how might it differ from the postcolonial? ✓

The absence of the United States in the postcolonial study of culture and imperialism curiously reproduces American exceptionalism from without. The United States either is absorbed into a general notion of "the West," represented by Europe, or it stands for a monolithic West. United States continental expansion is often treated as an entirely separate phenomenon from European colonialism of the nineteenth century, rather than as an interrelated form of imperial expansion. The divorce between these two histories mirrors the American historiographical tradition of viewing empire as a twentieth-century aberration, rather than as part of an expansionist continuum. By linking United States nation-building and empire-building as historically coterminous and mutually defining, the essays in this volume complicate the simple chronology that plots the U.S. empire emerging full blown at various stages of the twentieth century to step into the shoes of dying European empires; instead the essays explore in varied contexts how the United States, as Richard Drinnon has claimed, exports its past "metaphysics of Indian-hating" and Indian-fighting into new frontiers abroad and across new borders.¹⁸

The contrast we have seen in Miller between Old World and New World empires may still inform the current critical trajectories that separate British studies from American studies. While the former contests an ethnocentric national tradition by decentering it from the postcolonial vantage of commonwealth culture and imperial history, the deconstruction of a monolithic American tradition has revolved more around challenging the canon by competing domestic traditions. Two historically different yet interrelated definitions of empire—as external subjugation of colonies versus internal national consolidation—have been split between these two national cultures. Just as current studies of English nationalism are breaking down this split by examining the empire close to home, not only in Ireland but also in urban immigrant communities, this volume directs its focus on these interconnections between internal and external colonization in the imperial constitution of American national cultures. It links America as a colony and an empire to the imperial enterprises of other nations in a global system and insists on the historical specificity of the cultures of U.S. imperialism without either collapsing them into European models or propagating a new model of American exceptionalism.

The divergent yet intertwined histories of American and European imperialism might be found to cross paths where Perry Miller first conceived of the “meaning of America”: the banks of the Congo. In a recent revision of Conrad’s classic text of European imperialism, the documentary film *Hearts of Darkness*, by Eleanor Coppola, relocates the African site to Vietnam and the Philippines. Francis Ford Coppola would probably view *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as the reversal of Miller’s paradigm of the denial of empire, as the antiwar film exposes the horrors of American imperialism in Vietnam. Furthermore, Coppola might be seen to counter American exceptionalism, by scripting the war through Conrad’s text, and placing the Vietnam war in relation to the history of European imperialism. The documentary on the making of the film, however, which stands awkwardly between an exposé and a publicity reel, refuses recognition of the film’s complicity with the imperial context that enables its production, at the same time that context is paraded dramatically on the screen.

Coppola located his “Congo” as the setting for his exploration of the meaning of America in the late 1970s, neither in Africa nor in Vietnam, but in the Philippines, a former United States colony with ongoing strong ties to the United States through the repressive regime of President Ferdinand Marcos. There for great sums Coppola bought the support of the

regime, borrowed Marcos's bodyguards, and rented military equipment from the U.S. built army of the Philippines (since the U.S. military would not rent them equipment for an antiwar film). As the documentary covers the shooting of the famous scene of the helicopter attack on the beach, we watch the Filipino helicopters suddenly turn out of line as they are radioed by their commanders to fight a political insurrection in the immediate vicinity. The breakdown between fiction and history in these glaring parallels between the present in the Philippines and the past of Vietnam do not make Eleanor or Francis Coppola reflect on their participation as film makers in the dynamics of empire which the documentary explores as history. Instead, the blatant evidence of the surrounding reality of imperialism generates excitement in the voice-over about being in the "thick of the jungle," about being so close to a real battlefield. They find in the Philippines a way of retrieving nostalgically the intensity of the battlefield experience they may have rejected on political grounds. By turning the Philippines into a timeless "jungle" backdrop, outside of history, like the African "jungle" of Miller, the Coppolas deny the imperial history which brings them to the Philippines. Yet, like the setting of Africa, the backdrop of the Philippines speaks out of the cultures of U.S. imperialism which enable the production of this American epic film—as the helicopters break through the stage set to fight a real war. As we watch both the film and the documentary in the journey up the river, a river which conflates the Congo, Vietnam, and the Philippines and takes the viewer to "the beginning of time," indeed, as the productive political context of U.S. imperial culture fades from view, we are left alone with America.

Notes

I would like to thank Dick Burt, Leslie Moore, Michael Rogin, Priscilla Wald, and Don Weber for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this introduction.

1 William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955): 379–95.

2 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 6.

3 Perry Miller, "Preface," *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. vii–x. Subsequent references to the preface are to this edition; quotations from the other essays in this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.

4 Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Insti-

tutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31 (1979): 301–4; Myra Jehlen also views this scene as a typical American effort to locate national origins, in *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 28–29. Most studies of Miller's life and thought view this as a centrally defining scene; see, for example, Robert Middlekauff, "Perry Miller," in *Pastmasters*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin Winks (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 167–90. It is, after all, hard to imagine such a moment becoming as memorable in the lore of American historiography if it had taken place in, say, the mountains of Colorado or the streets of Greenwich Village (both places Miller visited as a college drop-out before he reached Africa).

5 Morrison, p. 8.

6 Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad Since 1750* (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 112.

7 In the late nineteenth century, for example, Henry Stanley's famous accounts of his travels both represented Africa to America and made him an active participant in the political and economic establishment of King Leopold's Free Congo. Stanley was a Welsh immigrant who, though he later resumed British citizenship, regarded himself as an American and was financed mostly by Americans at the time of his African explorations. He also advised the American delegates to the Berlin West Africa Conference (1884), the first major U.S. participation in the European colonial negotiations on the most effective principles for the occupation of Africa.

8 For Miller's rejection of Turner's thesis, see *Errand*, pp. 1–2.

9 For Miller's more direct statement of the need to turn to the intellect in the face of the nuclear threat of the machine age, see *Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines: Essays by Perry Miller*, ed. John Crowell and Stanford J. Searl, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979).

10 Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 12.

11 Klaus Schwabe, "The Global Role of the United States and Its Imperial Consequences, 1898–1973," in *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 13–33.

12 Richard Spielman, "The Emerging Unipolar World," *New York Times*, August 21, 1991, p. 27.

13 There are of course exceptions to this paradigm. See, for example, Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Drinnon, below.

14 Philip Fisher, *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. xxii.

15 This term is used by Annette Kolodny, who persuasively calls for redefin-

ing the literature of frontiers through "the evolving dialogue between different cultures and languages and their engagement with one another and with the physical terrain" (5) in "Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers," *American Literature* 64, (March 1992): 1–18. Her analysis, however, risks reproducing the monolithic model of American identity now defined by this new frontier of cultural contact and negotiation.

16 See, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Renato Rosaldo, "Ideology, Place, and People Without Culture," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, (1988): 77–87; José David Saldívar, "The Limits of Cultural Studies," *American Literary History* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 251–66.

17 A recent special issue of *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992), for example, entitled *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, includes no essays related to the United States. Lawrence Buell, in contrast, proposes that early American writers be understood as postcolonial; he thereby not only overlooks the history of American imperialism, but in a sense colonizes postcolonial theory by implicitly positing the United States as the original postcolonial nation; "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon," *American Literary History* 4.3 (Fall 1992): 411–42.

18 Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (New York: NAL, 1980). ✓